

## **INVESTIGATING RURAL DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND FACTORS FOR PROMOTING IT**

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### **Abstract**

Rural development is a multifaceted concept encompassing economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. This paper explores the various factors involved in promoting rural development, with a focus on the outcome produced by the interplay between agriculture, infrastructure development, non-farm activities, social and cultural relations, education, environmental sustainability and government interventions. Drawing from scholarly literature and empirical evidence, it examines the role of each of these components in enhancing the well-being of rural communities. Agriculture remains a cornerstone of rural economies, but diversification into non-farm activities and the development of infrastructure are equally important. Infrastructure investments improve market access, reduce transaction costs, and stimulate economic activity, while non-farm activities contribute to job creation and income generation. Moreover, promoting entrepreneurship and innovation can drive economic growth and create opportunities for rural businesses. Social and cultural relations play a vital role in rural development, fostering community cohesion and resilience. Education emerges as a key enabler of rural development, empowering individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in economic and social life effectively. Environmental sustainability is integral to rural development, as it ensures the long-term viability of rural ecosystems and livelihoods. Overall, rural development requires coordinated efforts across multiple fronts, involving various stakeholders and sectors. By addressing economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges in an integrated manner, policymakers can foster inclusive and sustainable rural development, thereby improving the well-being of rural communities and contributing to overall national development goals.

### **Keywords**

rural development, factors, rural growth, economy, social, culture, environment.

### **JEL Classification**

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**Introduction**

Economic and social initiatives aimed at promoting ideas of preservation, progress, and extension in areas not centred around cities are referred to as rural development initiatives. One of the goals of these initiatives is to enhance the standard of living for those living in rural areas.

The growth of rural communities is a top priority for the European Union. As a result, Agenda 2000's rural development was viewed as the second pillar of the common agricultural strategy (European Commission, 2000). According to the European Commission's perspective, rural development should also focus on the rural economy by creating jobs, diversifying the activities in the area, and preserving the rural heritage—all while adhering to the duty of preserving the environment. The United Nations also recognizes that rural area development is crucial. The United Nations established Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), an extensive plan of action aimed at creating a worldwide cooperation for sustainable development, improving human well-being, and safeguarding the environment. Subsequently, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) updated its goals, one of which was to assist rural development.

Rural development remains a focal point in global discourse, representing the progress, sustainability, and empowerment of rural areas worldwide. The concept traverses beyond mere economic growth and encompasses a holistic improvement in the quality of life, infrastructure, and socio-economic opportunities within rural communities. However, the multifaceted nature of rural development necessitates a nuanced understanding, encapsulating diverse perspectives and criteria for its definition.

Traditionally associated with technological advances in agriculture, rural development has emerged as a broad concept that includes social, economic, and environmental aspects. It acts as an amplifier for sustainable growth and balanced regional advancement, frequently interacting with local, national, and international objectives.

There is no definitive phrase for rural development for academics, national organizations, or international organizations. This is because the idea is constantly being redefined through modification, change, and, frequently, expansion of its scope (Wubayehu, 2020). "The sustained improvement of the population's standards of living or welfare" might be a very condensed form of the concept (Wubayehu, 2020). OECD (2020) make use of the notion of citizens' well-being and considers that rural well-being shifts from a one-dimensional to a multi-dimensional view of rural policies with three types of rural settlements: inside functional urban areas, close to cities, and remote rural; three objectives: economic, social, and environmental; and three different stakeholders: the government, the private sector, and civil society. This approach follows the idea of having a particular location to consider when to advocate a tailored rural policy.

Starting from these diverse perspectives on rural development that encompass a broad array of economic, social, cultural and environmental facets, we consider necessary to identify the factors that contribute to the advancement of rural communities. This paper aims to formulate a list of elements that can contribute to rural development and whose support and implementation ensure such an outcome.

In this study, we begin with a comprehensive review of the scientific literature, exploring existing theories and findings related to rural development and factors that influenced it. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the research methodology, outlining the approaches and techniques employed to gather and analyse data. Subsequently, we present the results and discussion, where we interpret the findings in the context of the conceptual framework and identify key factors influencing rural development. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main insights and their implications for future policy and research in rural development.

### 1. Review of the scientific literature

Until the middle of the last century, the term "rural" was used to describe a largely homogeneous area with agriculture as the main economic activity, sparsely populated regions, and a specific way of living. This characterization is no longer relevant today because of the structural shifting, boosted by numerous influences produced by the rapid changes in the human society that emerged in the last 50 years (Hart et al., 2005). Many rural communities embraced the new technologies and evolved into societies much closer to the specificities of an urban area (Pemperton, 2019, Glaeser, 2010). Factors such as the number of residents, density, closeness, level of urbanization, proximity and connection to an urban area, primary economic activity, trade and economic connections, and work commuting are typically taken into consideration while developing rural and urban classifications (Hart et al., 2005). From a strategic and spatial approach, rural refers to as a geographical classification characterized by dimension factors, settlement organization, or socioeconomic characteristics (Nelson et al., 2021). In this line was introduced in the Recommendation 1296 (1996) of the Parliamentary Assembly on the European Charter for Rural Areas (Recommendation 1296) the following definition of a rural area: "[...] the term <<rural area>> denotes a stretch of inland or coastal countryside, including small towns and villages, where the main part of the area is used for: a. agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and fisheries; b. economic and cultural activities of country-dwellers (crafts, industry, services, etc.); c. non-urban recreation and leisure areas (or natural reserves); d. other purposes, such as for housing.

*The agricultural (including forestry, aquaculture and fisheries) and non-agricultural parts of a rural area form a whole distinguishable from an urban area, which is characterised by a high concentration of inhabitants and of vertical or horizontal structures".*

A broad definition of rural regions includes both scattered rural settlements and the functionally connected rural towns that serve the neighbouring agricultural settlements by serving as hubs for numerous agro-processing activities, additional nonfarm services, and commercial enterprises (Anderson and Leiserson, 1978).

In most cases, the definitions of rural contain a broader or shorter reference to the term urban (Petrovič and Maturkanič, 2022). The reference to this binomial can indicate both the speaker's desire to signal obvious differences and by way of consequence net positive or negative aspects on one side or the other, but also the existence of a link between 2 poles, with their own social and economic amplitude, which attract each other but at the same time they are rejected.

Many definitions present the rural world as in opposition to the urban society. When the rural image is built in connection to external references like the nation or the city, it exposes the shortcomings that challenge the positive development of non-urban areas. These negative developments may be linked to the ageing of the population, the exodus of young, educated individuals, the crowding out of the business community, the population loss, or the degradation of the infrastructure (Copus, 2011). Also, the failure to provide fundamental services (like health care or education) transforms rural regions into depopulating areas (Christiaanse, 2020).

In these conditions, the concept of rural development has to address all together the downfalls of quotidian life and the new perspectives introduced by the evolution of the human society.

The scientific literature provides an exhaustive list of internal or external factors that are impacting rural life in all of its dimensions: the economic power of the community, the social and cultural relations, the traditions and heritage, the environmental conditions, the position versus urban life, and the degree of visibility in the strategies developed by public policy makers (Straka and Tuzová, 2016; Abreu, et al. 2021).

The economic dimension of the rural area is influenced by many factors. One of them is the existence of the infrastructure. Rural infrastructure, in the opinion of Satish (2007), is crucial to the expansion of agriculture, allied sectors, and the general economic health of those regions. Nevertheless, it also contributes significantly to the well-being of the vast majority of rural residents by offering necessities that raise the standard of living (Satish, 2007; Heijman and Van der Heide, 2000). It proves difficult to provide goods or services in the quantity and quality that customers require if there is no access to reliable transportation, water and sewage, electricity and communication networks (Cook, 2011; Francisco and Tanaka, 2019; Gharehbaghi et. al., 2020). The rising transaction costs are impacted by this circumstance. It also is important to mention the positive effects of education, health, administration, and irrigation infrastructure (Demeke et al., 2021; Ebi et al., 2007). To prevent the seclusion of the rural area and its inhabitants, infrastructure integration is required if the demand is situated in a separate region. Also, new technological developments can be implemented in rural regions, such as digital inclusive finance which significantly and favourably contributes to the development of high-quality rural areas, primarily via the channels of economic productivity, rural and urban structure, environmental improvement, living harmony, and creative growth potential (Sun and Zhu, 2022).

Another factor that circumvented the economic area is the existence of the rural nonfarm economy (i.e. all economic activities except the production of soil and stock farming commodities). This covers many sectors of industry and services like extractive industries, manufacturing, energy sectors, tourism, construction, financial services, trade, transportation, and governmental services as well (Haggblade et al., 2010; Vukovic and Subic, 2019). One important aspect of the nonfarm rural economy is agroindustry, which is the conversion of new products of basic agricultural goods through grinding, wrapping, bulking, or distribution. Even in some places the nonfarm economy negatively influences the agriculture sector, by occupying the land and destroying the primary resources for

cropping and stock farming (for example extractive industries), in general, entrepreneurship in rural could be considered complementary to farming economic activity by adding value to primary products with new goods and services (Alsos et al., 2014). The results of trading new commodities and services will return as positive effects for local community (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Expanding companies support the general economic growth of areas and communities, having favourable direct effects on tax income, in-migration, and employment, as well as indirect effects on things like supply-side conditions and competition (Fritsch and Mueller, 2004). Even a unique project like building correctional facilities in rural areas can change the community's features by creating an accessible establishment that meets demands and stimulates the local economy (Park and Baek, 2022). Foreign direct investments have their share in the development of the rural economy (Woods and McDonagh, 2011).

The social and cultural relations are vital in rural development for several reasons. They contribute to the cohesion of rural communities. Robust social bonds augment a sense of inclusion and collaboration among constituents, producing an atmosphere that is conducive to developmental endeavours (Long et al., 2022; Risopoulos-Pichler et al., 2023; Larsen et al., 2021). Social capital is developed in rural communities through social networks and interactions. Trust and collaboration, or social capital, are important tools for starting and maintaining development efforts. It makes group effort and community involvement easier (Noll et al., 2023; Nowak and Myśliwska, 2018; Shafiei and Khaksar, 2020; Podgorskaya and Schitov, 2021). Development projects that take into account social and cultural relations have the promise to be inclusive and to respect the variety of rural populations. To meet the demands of many social groups, such as minorities and marginalized populations, this inclusivity is essential (Xia, 2014; Borodina and Prokopa 2019; Chadda and Chadha, 2019). Obtaining rural development is an objective that will be achieved if the cultural values are appropriately acknowledged and managed and changes envisaged are embraced by the community and do not undermine significant cultural practices (Šmid Hribar and Lozej, 2013; Maziliauske, 2024).

Enabling the growth of rural areas can give local communities the opportunity to voice their thoughts, exchange their expertise, and actively engage in the decision-making procedures concerning development initiatives. Initiatives for rural development are also largely sparked by the participation of rural women in the decision-making process, which instils a sense of pride, fulfilment, and enjoyment (Van Der Ploeg and Renting, 2000). Strong social ties contribute to the resilience of rural communities and help communities adapt to changes, whether they are environmental, economic, or social, fostering a more robust and adaptable development framework (Esengulova et al., 2023). Many academics concurred that every nation's unique characteristics—such as its political system, level of government centralization, level of civil or business involvement, and existence of a robust collaborative tradition - have a substantial impact on the type and intensity of partnerships (Moseley, 2023; Marquardt et al., 2012; Maurel, 2008; Murray et al., 2008). But whatever is the structure adopted by the exchange ideas platform, the well-maintained social and cultural relations contribute to a sense of well-being and enhance the overall quality of life for residents (Janković et al., 2021).

Sustainable development seeks to preserve the cultural heritage and local knowledge since these factors are important for meeting the unique demands of the community and help make rural communities more resilient. Communities with deep social connections and a vibrant cultural heritage, including traditions, customs, folklore, and historical landmarks, possess the necessary tools to adapt to shifts in society, the economy, and the environment. As a result, they establish a solid foundation for progress and growth. Peasant farming's socioeconomic integration through the value-adding of regional biocultural goods creates connections of differing degrees between producers, their surroundings, and final customers. The strength of these connections is determined by the actual processes and innovations required for the interaction, preservation, and valuation of biocultural resources, rather than by the level of organization taken into consideration, which ranges from local association to national confederation (Núñez-Carrasco et al., 2023).

The interdependence between cultural and natural heritage marks the way to another set of goals that form the cornerstone of rural development: environmental sustainability and biodiversity preservation. The issue related to land use linked to the economic activities established in these key areas is identified by the environmental component of the rural regions. Putting it simply, unsuitable land use is the insufficient use of soils in agriculture and excessive utilisation of them in livestock farming, which hinders rural and human growth in terms of creating jobs, generating capital, preserving the environment, and managing the earth's resources. Furthermore, the need for products made from wood has resulted in uncontrolled deforestation, causing significant harm to the environment and potential consequences such as heightened instances of flooding, accumulation of sediment in riverbeds, erosion of soil etc.

But, on the other hand, positive social transformation is seen to be supported in part by the environment, and ecology serves as a unifying force for all contemporary forms of social and cultural expression as well as a key to comprehending the current state of culture (Hernández et al., 1993). It is essential to emphasize that the core concepts and principles of ecology are applicable to a diverse range of critical issues that impact the progress and evolution of societies across the globe. The depletion of land resources and contamination of water supplies are only two examples of the many ecological issues that rural areas face. Other serious components of the environmental issues in rural areas are atmospheric pollution and improper waste management. (Cai et al., 2023). The effects mentioned greatly impact the daily lives of those residing in these communities. Environmental goods can have a significant impact on the lives of farmers, both financially and in terms of their quality of life. These goods can either be things that benefit society as a whole, like clean air and water, or things that can be sold for profit. They come from natural ecosystems, like forests and wetlands, and can be used for things like food, fuel, and medicine. They can even provide recreational opportunities, which can bring economic benefits to individuals and communities. Overall, environmental goods represent a valuable resource for farmers and communities alike, providing both economic and ecological benefits (Gorman et al., 2001).

Rural development is impacted by the position of the entire society on rural life versus urban life and the degree of visibility in the strategies developed by public policymakers. Even though people are still being drawn to busy cities by urbanization in quest of contemporary conveniences and economic possibilities, rural development is still very important because a country's economy is greatly bolstered by its rural sections, which are frequently the centres of agriculture and suppliers of essential resources (Rypl et al., 2024). Furthermore, the distinctive way of life and abundance of culture found in rural areas contrast sharply with the fast-paced, frequently faceless life found in cities (Idaiani and Saptarini, 2023; Takahashi et al., 2024). Public policymakers face a problem in balancing the requirements of both urban and rural people (Shin et al., 2024). Acknowledging the inherent significance of rural development is critical to promoting sustainable growth that meets the varied needs of a country. The extent to which public authorities prioritize rural living in their policies is a critical factor in influencing the efficacy and inclusivity of development projects. Historically, policies that prioritize metropolitan areas have occasionally cast a shadow over rural communities, resulting in differences in healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Nonetheless, legislators are becoming more conscious of the necessity of giving rural development first priority in order to guarantee fair advancement (Tao, 2023). Strategies that take into account the special opportunities and problems that come with living in a rural area can lead to increased social cohesion, economic productivity, and cultural preservation (Dax and Copus, 2022). A country's ability to construct inclusive frameworks that bridge the rural-urban divide and its commitment to holistic development can be measured by how visible rural life is in policy deliberations (Irvine et al., 2014).

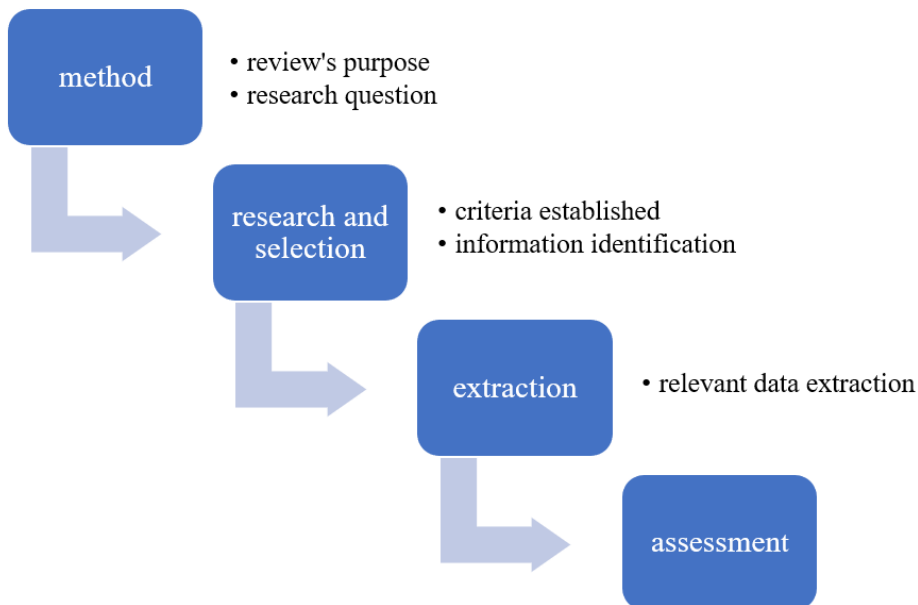
To secure the enduring progress and success of rural regions, these communities must develop sustainable strategies that prioritize their autonomy, capacity to fulfil their requirements, the growth of their economic endeavours, and the conscientious stewardship of their environment. The concept of multifunctionality plays a significant role in achieving both environmental conservation and economic diversification, but it is important to establish appropriate regulations that prevent any negative impact on agriculture and cultural heritage (Salas-Razo, 2023).

## **2. Research methodology**

Rural development is a multifaceted concept encompassing economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. This paper explores the various factors involved in promoting rural development, with a focus on the outcomes produced by the interplay between the agriculture sector, infrastructure development, non-farm activities, social and cultural relations, education, environmental sustainability, and government interventions. Drawing from scholarly literature and empirical evidence, it examines the role of each of these components in enhancing the well-being of rural communities.

Regarding the process of obtaining and evaluation of the information, the methodology was divided into four phases: method, research and selection, extraction, and assessment. During the method stage, the review's purpose is presented, and the research question is formed. The criteria for research and selection information are then established, followed by the identification of the information and the extraction of relevant data. Lastly, an

assessment is conducted to provide answers to the research question. (Figure no. 1) depicts the steps followed in the research.



**Figure no. 1: The steps followed in the research**

At the method step, the review's purpose is presented and the research question is introduced: What are the primary factors that support rural development?

The first step in the research and picking process involves identifying the keywords based on the given question. The chosen words are: rural development, factors, rural growth, economy, social, culture, and environment.

After that, we decided to use the Scopus bibliographic searching tool, due to its extensive coverage and rigorous indexing of peer-reviewed literature across various disciplines, including social sciences, economics, and environmental studies, which are critical to our research on rural development. Scopus offers a comprehensive and high-quality repository of academic articles, conference proceedings, and books, ensuring that our literature review is both thorough and representative of the current state of knowledge. Furthermore, Scopus provides advanced search capabilities and citation analysis tools, allowing us to efficiently identify and analyse relevant studies, thereby enhancing the robustness and credibility of our research findings.

Subsequently, a preliminary exploration was conducted using the terms “rural development” and “factors” without applying any additional criteria. In total, 29,202 documents were found; then the search was limited to 6 subject areas that registered a high number of articles: Social Sciences (9,171 documents), Environmental Science (6,747), Agricultural and Biological Sciences (3,783), Earth and Planetary Sciences



(2,343), Economics, Econometrics and Finance (2,040) and Business, Management and Accounting (1,733). The portfolio was then narrowed down to 5,806 documents to include those in English, French and Romanian and with “open access”. Using the connectors (and) and (or) to combine keyword-lists, a search chain was created, yielding a total of 648 results. The search chain we employed was as follows: "factors AND ('rural development' OR 'rural growth') AND (economy OR social OR culture OR heritage OR environment)".

Once we have identified the relevant data that aligns with the analysis objective in the extraction phase, we proceed to evaluate it. For our paper, we utilized in this process a total of 88 studies and articles that are listed in the References section.

### 3. Results and discussions

The concept of rural development transcends a unidimensional perspective, incorporating economic, social, and environmental facets. The main focus is to boost the economic growth of rural regions by implementing programmes that support the productivity of agriculture, encourage a variety of income sources, and stimulate the development of rural industries. This economic dimension intertwines with social progress, encompassing improvements in education, healthcare, gender equality, and social inclusion within rural communities. Simultaneously, rural development emphasises environmental sustainability, advocating for responsible resource management, conservation efforts, and the mitigation of ecological degradation. Numerous indicators can be used to identify rural underdevelopment.

The strength of the economy, social culture, presence of the environment, and state support are elements that have been recognised as having the potential to either promote or decrease the well-being of rural life. Therefore, these characteristics can be used as factors to introduce rural development, and the stakeholders' decisions will determine the paths that rural society will follow in the near or long term (Atkinson, 2017).

#### 3.1 Economy – agriculture, infrastructure, non-farm activities

To meet the standards for well-being, there must be an economic environment that is robust enough to provide the people living in rural communities the freedom to select their lifestyle. The possibility of making long-term profits is a facet of everyday life that is connected to economics. The three key arms that shape the economic landscape of rural areas are agriculture, infrastructure, and non-farm activities. We will now elaborate on the factors that have the potential to boost the growth of these sectors.

The agricultural output, plant and animal husbandry, and somewhat crude processing of agricultural goods formed the foundation of the rural economy. Under ideal circumstances, those few activities were sufficient for certain communities to view life as acceptable. But in the new era of the industrial revolution, the rural has, step by step, begun to “import” those remarkable achievements of the other sectors of the economy. That transfer of knowledge had two consequences: the fortification of the agriculture sector and, at the same time, the creation and development of new sectors of activities in the rural regions.

The production of food is the most important activity for human society. Is the driver of civilizations over time and, from the ancient times of Egyptian grain shipped to the

Roman Empire to the Ukrainian grain delivered to Africa and Asia, humanity survives or not if the fields are cultivated and the animals are bred. Is without a question that agriculture is one the most important factor in the process of rural development. Consequently, any measure which aims to make the process of obtaining agricultural products more efficient, and profitable but eco-friendly is welcomed and represents a base for rural development.

In general, infrastructure development has favourable benefits for the economy and society in the following ways: simpler market access; reduced transaction costs; an increase in the number and volume of transactions; an increase in the income level of individuals and businesses; support for regional cohesion; a reduction in isolation; an increase in investments, new jobs, and lower unemployment; diversification of non-agricultural activities; and an increase in citizen mobility. Consolidating the transportation network also has educational consequences. The kids will attend class longer, which will improve their performance.

The most noticeable consequences of infrastructure development in rural areas are increases in household expenditures, workdays, and incomes at the individual level. Additionally, public investments in rail, roads, telecommunication, electricity networks, dams, and other infrastructure create opportunities for businesses because improved infrastructure can spur economic activity and encourage microenterprises to enter the market. In conclusion, infrastructure has a major influence on inclusive growth. (Jiang et al., 2022; Chaurey and Le, 2022).

Because agricultural adaptation is predicted to decrease farming employment prospects and increase reliance on public transfers, there is an even greater need for economic diversification and integrated development in these areas (Stathopoulou et al., 2004). Prior recommendations called for increasing agricultural productivity to reduce rural poverty (Johnston and Mellor, 1961). However, the notion that farming will be the only source of funding for the development of rural areas has been superseded by the livelihood strategy, which consists of a wide range of activities that increase a person's capacity for both survival and a good standard of living (Cook, 2011). And the first steps were made some time ago, when, for example, some farmers chose to develop a portion of their land into a recreation area for visitors, which could include activities such as hiking, fishing, or camping. This would allow them to generate additional income from his terrain beyond traditional agricultural activities.

Rural entrepreneurship has a lot of potential benefits from the standpoint of local development, especially for businesses that aim to achieve firm growth. Growth-oriented initiatives have the potential to produce rapid and high rates of economic growth at the venture level, provided that they are fully integrated into global capital flows. In today's interconnected world economy, these companies will no longer face restrictions from limited local markets or barriers to accessing local resources. These constraints, which in the past often posed obstacles and impeded business growth, are now a thing of the past. By operating in global factor and product markets, they can overcome these limitations and pursue growth opportunities. The diversification of the rural economy does not restrict the development of farm activities. One type of activity can positively influence

others. For example, successful hospitality businesses will enable the development of structures that improve the local community's well-being in several ways, such as encouraging the use and commercialization of locally produced goods and activities and boosting the operations of companies that provide complementary services (Cunha et al., 2020). Numerous lifestyle businesses that enable entrepreneurs to turn their passions, hobbies, or abilities into a steady source of income can develop in the countryside, aside from the core farm activity. The various activities that lifestyle entrepreneurs engage in on their farms, like cultivation of organic produce, a variety of tourism-related activities (like lodging or horseback riding), or the sale of farm-to-table goods (like fruits, eggs, meat products, olive oil, milk, or wine), demonstrate a complementary approach that appears to support not only a better overall experience supply at the rural destination but also a greater operational and financial balance of the main business (Cunha et al., 2020; Kastenholz and Sparrer, 2009). Due to these role models' inspiration and motivation, other entrepreneurs will be drawn to the area and will consolidate the local business environment. In addition to bolstering the growth of a particular business, this kind of intricate and creative offer in countryside regions also helps other enterprises grow by forming collaborations and connections with them. By showing readiness to collaborate, recognising shared interests, and setting an example for others to follow and be part of those rural entrepreneurial ecosystems, these non-farm businesses assume an intriguing, occasionally leading role in the sustainable development of the rural territory.

### *3.2 Social and cultural relations*

The social relations in rural areas are a strong factor in their development. Active interaction, on social, cultural, economic, and educational levels, between the members of the community seeking common life improvement is one important method. The focus on the abilities, cooperation, views, and talents of the local population is one of the fundamental components of endogenous rural development (Ray, 2006). People learn about cultural, environmental, and communal values through such interaction. Complementary with that, the exchanges between the local formal or informal entities and the knowledge transfer centres for the dissemination of socioeconomic inventiveness and multi-functionality in farming and nonfarming sectors, with the preservation and revitalization of the local heritage, could be a factor of positive action in the interest of achieving rural development (Bindi et al., 2022).

To attain a decent standard of living, rural communities can use their social capital as well as the advantages of their cultural and natural resources. Overall positive outcomes, as well as an enhanced and durable social environment, are triggered by a willingness to work cooperatively with others, whether they be neighbours or foreigners, and to recognise and embrace shared interests. The growth of the rural community is greatly influenced by the artistic endeavours, cultural networks and initiatives of the rural players. Local culture is typically associated with the historical, social, geographical position, particular content, and natural resources of the area and can give it a competitive edge over other regions. In this way, a given area's distinctive local culture has the potential to improve the lives of the locals if they explore and exploit its specificity and use it wisely as a fabulous asset.

With effects on the community's economic, social, and ecological conditions, culture is a potent force behind rural development. Through cultural tourism, handmade products, artistic creation, agriculture, gastronomy, medical practice, and aquaculture, activities with cultural signatures foster economic development. The use of traditional farming and cooking methods preserves the historical heritage and allows communities to rely on common marks of identification. The basis for biodiversity protection, social cohesion enhancement, and a sustainable environment is the interdependence between culture and nature's resources. A community that is aware of its culture and heritage will be able to motivate individuals, create strong, cohesive communities, and increase public trust and accountability in institutions to support the social inclusion of the vulnerable and impoverished. The rural cultural landscape is under the pressure of being annihilated by some forces of globalisation, so saving the traditions and history is an important sign of rural development. But it is also possible to use the transforming wave in the process of organising and highlighting the area's natural, cultural, and historical resources in order to transform the rural cultural landscape. Residents use the new infrastructure —sports and recreation centres, tourist attractions, social and cultural spaces, cultural heritage objectives, etc.— to carry out "soft" projects because it makes it possible to plan a range of festivals and events that promote community integration and identity preservation. A lot of the distinctive cultural products and traditions found in the countryside can be used to help grow the local economy. For those living in rural areas, fostering cultural tourism and supporting cultural enterprises can result in job opportunities and revenue. Rural entrepreneurs, especially SMEs, are often regarded as cultural agents because of their unique relational interactions and attachment to a place. They play an essential part in the social and cultural long-term viability of rural destinations by offering chances to be submerged in local cultures and society. Producing a tourism offering rooted in the culture of the area is a way to give the community more authority and control over its growth. Using cultural values to guide development planning in a bottom-up manner can help avoid disagreements and produce better long-term outcomes. However, it is essential for both the inhabitants and tourists to appreciate and embrace the advantages of rural resources.

Social networks are another way that people can be aware of their belonging to a specific place, which is also described in terms of the significance of bonds to family, friends, and social reliance. Digitalization is a method for boosting economic performance, education efforts, and social and cultural relations inside and outside of the rural community.

### *3.3 Education*

By giving people in rural areas access to knowledge and skills, education can improve their socioeconomic circumstances and enable them to contribute more effectively to their communities. Giving people the abilities they need for economic development can help solve challenges like poverty, unemployment, and scarce resources that affect rural communities. Through providing opportunities for individual development and advancement, education can encourage social mobility and lessen inequality (Navaratnam, 1986).

Education is another factor that can support the sustainable development of rural communities by emphasising the distinctive needs and characteristics of these locations. It can improve farming methods, encourage innovation, and support entrepreneurial spirit, which will contribute to rural communities' economies and performance.

In developing nations, education is essential for rural development because it lowers poverty, promotes economic equality, and manages unemployment. In rural places, it has a sway over how people grow as individuals, families, communities, and society. Education affects many aspects of rural systems, including supply, production, marketing, employee maintenance, education, health care, and government. It contributes to social transformation, raises living standards and social standing, encourages involvement in rural and cultural development, and strengthens rural residents' critical thinking skills so they can identify needs and stand up for their rights. In addition, education creates skilled labour for rural areas, connects rural and urban areas, offers job and income options, boosts labour force productivity, and fosters leadership. Rural residents' overall welfare is directly influenced by education, which plays a crucial role in transforming rural areas. Education is both a result of progress and a catalyst for economic advancement. While it cannot single-handedly determine the outcome of rural development, education is an indispensable weapon in the battle for rural progress. Several elements influence rural development, but one of the most crucial is education. People from educated rural backgrounds are better able to adapt to urban contexts, and rural development happens when the rural and urban sectors work together on complementing projects. By enabling rural residents to alter their social and physical surroundings and advance in meeting their requirements, education serves as a bridge between the rural and urban sectors. It helps with the social transition between the rural and urban sectors and gets people from rural regions ready for the move to the city. A key element of rural development is education, which also helps to effect change. There are several educational programmes depending on the political and socioeconomic structures in place, but to meet everyone's basic needs, human intelligence and energy must be used.

#### *3.4 Environment*

Rural development requires the preservation of ecological balance and the management of natural resources. The importance of biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability in the process of rural development has been revealed in recent years due to increased awareness of the fragile balance between human activities and the natural environment. Therefore, the environmental factor is important in the process of obtaining rural development.

Environmental conservation efforts should embrace the expertise of peasant societies, as they have shown the ability to preserve their habitats while exploiting them. In general, rural communities are concerned about environmental issues, but they do not always have the means to address them. Projects aimed at developing rural areas should safeguard the environment while taking into account the needs of various rural residents. To achieve viable environmental development, long-term community growth is necessary. This entails tackling issues like reducing rural poverty, overcoming historical legacies, comprehending regional circumstances, managing initiatives, and involving the community as an active participant in governing conservation.

Setting environmental protection as a top priority requires an understanding of the economic, social, and cultural roles played by various social groups involved in rural social-economic life (Dufumier, 1992). The men, women, and children who live surrounded by unspoiled nature are the primary beneficiaries of the environmental protection process. However, there is another viewpoint that needs to be considered in the context of broadening rural activity. Of tourists. From their perspective, vacationing in the countryside is supposed to facilitate assimilation into an envisioned atmosphere that differs greatly from urban environments. In other words, it allows people to escape urban stressors like noise, pollution, and artificially crowded living environments. By combining preservation with tourism, displacing the tradition of protection with a conservation strategy, and including the community in the administration of conservation, resources from nature can be prudently utilised to fight poverty.

To attain food security and sustainable development, it is crucial to diminish pollution emissions and enhance food production. Nevertheless, several instances have demonstrated that resource exhaustion, degradation of the environment, loss of biodiversity, and contamination of the environment have coincided with a rise in agricultural output. Rural development implies an efficient use of natural resources in ways that complement and improve the regional and national ecosystem, as opposed to upsetting and harming it. In other words, the ecofriendly economy is made up of successful entrepreneurship that makes use of the various and unique types of natural assets found in rural areas in ecologically sound ways that do not cause an overall degradation of natural assets yet provide worth to the environment.

The rural community might perceive environmental protection as a burden, but with the appropriate viewpoint, it can actually be recognized as a useful resource. The untouched landscape could serve as a motto for a long list of activities that are appealing to tourists and will strengthen the local economy and promote rural development, in addition to their importance of providing a healthy environment for the locals with clean water, zero air pollution, and healthy food. Environmentally friendly hotel and resort development is a response to the rapidly expanding ecotourism businesses and rising public consciousness of environmental conservation. Parks, wilderness, natural habitats, and other ecosystems are growing in popularity as travel destinations. The preferred getaways are those related to history and culture. This kind of tourism is characterized by experiencing different traditions and habits, understanding more old cultures, seeing historic places, and engaging with arts and folklore. Trekking on forest trails, snorkelling, or climbing peaks are examples of outdoor activities that could be promoted by rural entrepreneurship. Also, travel for health or fun using natural thermal or sprinkling waters is an important economic tool for supporting rural development.

A balanced approach might reconcile the demand for food and rural services with the preservation of nature. It is true that having an eco-environment mindset could be advantageous for rural areas and the population's well-being.

### *3.5 Stakeholders*

Two possible channels could be considered for promoting the development of rural areas: local entities and local and central public institutions. In the case of the European Union,

the specific European projects could be assimilated into a third channel that implements projects dedicated to rural development (Biczkowski, 2020). The term local entities covers civic society (either individuals or economic, social, or environmental associations) and private undertakings or economic groups that have a direct interest in the future evolution of those areas. The stakeholders are important factors in the process of boosting rural development.

Every region needs to acknowledge and take advantage of its unique development opportunities. This calls for innovative social solutions from regional and local stakeholders in addition to projects initiated at the central national or European level. They have to assemble connections and community organizations that create cultural, social, ecological, and business ventures and invigorate processes in areas from the bottom level up, making them a crucial component in rural revitalization. Because the most qualified “experts” on the objectives regarding the growth of their territory are the locals themselves, enhancing the community's capacities that embody their enduring capacity is critical to long-term rural development. This makes societies resilient to outside influences and even unanticipated events.

Since partnerships for rural development involve a variety of stakeholders, their primary objective is to produce a win-win situation for everyone involved by pooling their assets and knowledge to effectively meet common socioeconomic or ecological objectives. An example of that successful partnership is the creation of the Local Action Groups, which proposes an ascensional approach with decisions taken at the local level and the support of the central level.

The act of forming partnerships for rural development has a twofold effect: it empowers individuals and enhances their ability to act locally, while also fostering a greater understanding of system thinking. This skill is invaluable when navigating difficulty and seeking effective solutions for a positive future. The roles of partners will be different; some will assume the roles of leaders and connectors with other local entities, encouraging the exchange of knowledge and collaboration. Some stakeholders will introduce the needs of the community; others will create a network that reaches all the partners, increasing inclusion and the possibility of collective action.

### *3.6 Governmental actions*

Governments may significantly contribute to inclusive and sustainable rural development by enacting policies that support it and carrying out these initiatives, which will lessen the differences between rural and urban areas and advance national development as a whole. The government's ongoing efforts to convince its citizens to embrace a lifestyle that harmonizes with nature instead of working against it revolve around several key areas: education, wealth, community involvement, environmental practices, and environmental awareness.

Investing in rural infrastructure such as roads, rail, airports, bridges, water supply, telecommunications, or electricity can improve connectivity and access to essential services, stimulating economic activity and enhancing the quality of life in rural areas. By putting in place agricultural assistance programmes such as training courses, outreach programmes, and subsidies, the public authorities may help farmers and advance sustainable farming methods while also increasing agricultural production.

Companies feel entitled to become more competitive in the age of globalization to expand their product offerings and penetrate fresh markets. Both national and local governments have an interest in bolstering business endeavours through the provision of state aid, entering the market themselves, or modifying the legal landscape in relation to fiscal, social, and regulatory matters. The involvement of authorities is highly significant in encouraging the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems in rural areas. These areas often lack the necessary resources, motivation, and vision to thrive, such as human, social, and economic capital. By utilizing their financial influence, national reach, institutional connections, and market expertise, public authorities can play a crucial role in fostering growth and innovation in these underserved regions. The direct public actions can be shaped as giving rural entrepreneurs financial support, company development services, and training programmes. The state aid measures implemented to support farming or industrial activities are an important public instrument. When a market failure is documented, granting state aid in a prudent manner, without affecting the competition in a substantial way, is a solution embraced by the public authorities and with positive effects for the communities. Supporting rural tourism as a public horizontal activity will create chances for income diversification and the preservation of cultural assets. This implies advertising campaigns, investment in infrastructure, and skill improvement to stimulate the economies in the area.

Enabling rural businesses, farmers, and individuals to gain access to credit and financial services can provide them with the opportunity to allocate funds towards productive endeavours, enhance their operational scope, and enhance their overall quality of life.

Enhancing human capital, empowering people, and fostering economic diversification can all be achieved in rural regions through investing in education, training, and skill development programmes. The education of the young generation is a public tool that contributes to the expansion of their capacity to become reliable factors in rural development. They will be future farmers, entrepreneurs, public servants, doctors, or teachers equipped with the necessary knowledge to make full use of new technologies and sciences. Educational programmes implemented using governmental funds targeting local communities or rural business representatives allow an increase in skills, adaptation, and performance that enable superior performance in social and economic activities. The result of that is a general improvement in their standards of living (Subic et al., 2010).

The implementation by the government of health facilities, mobile clinics, and telemedicine programmes can improve health conditions and increase the well-being of rural populations by guaranteeing access to high-quality healthcare facilities in these locations.

The public authorities are the main actors in the process of preserving ecosystems and natural resources. They have the power to put in place policies and programmes for land use planning, water conservation, and environmental protection. Also, education that public agencies support plays a crucial role in enhancing individuals' understanding and concern for the environment. These actions will encourage a shift in ecological practices in rural regions and accomplish the objective of attaining sustainable progress.



Increasing rural communities' access to digital technologies and broadband can help close the digital divide, make it easier for people to access markets and information, and open up new possibilities for e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship.

Encouraging community participation in project design, execution, and decision-making can improve social cohesion, local ownership, and the sustainability of rural development programmes. Co-designing a development initiative can help stakeholders become more self-aware, create a common vision, and come up with innovative ideas and activities that add value. In the end, from this will benefit the region as a whole.

In most countries, government programmes are responsible for implementing public actions in rural areas that aim to create infrastructure, foster the growth of entrepreneurial ecosystems, support education, training, and skill development, establish health facilities, or preserve and add value to natural resources and ecosystems.

In the USA, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) administrates such a rural development program that promotes, through loans, grants, and public guarantees, essential services like housing, economic growth, healthcare, first responder services and equipment, and infrastructure for communications, electricity, and water. With the goal of improving rural communities' infrastructure and creating jobs, the USDA has announced \$1.1 billion in loan and grant awards (at 11.1.2023) to support 104 projects that will provide sustainable energy, clean water, and reliable power to residents in almost every state (USDA, 2024).

In Romania, the objective of the National Rural Development Program is to promote balanced, inclusive, and sustainable rural development in Romania. This program is designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by rural areas, aiming to improve the quality of life for rural inhabitants, enhance the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, encouraging rural economic diversification and job creation and preserve the natural environment. For the period 2007-2013, the budget allocation was EUR 8,12 billion (PNDR 2007-2013), EUR 9,363 billion for the following period (PNDR 2014-2020) and EUR 3,26 billion for the present period (PNDR 2021-2027).

India launched several initiatives to aid in the development of rural areas. Unnat Bharat Abhiyan is one of the most popular programmes; its goal was to raise rural inhabitants' standards of living by giving them access to specialised facilities for science, technology, engineering, and administration. With an emphasis on several areas, including the environment, agriculture, medical care, schooling, and sanitation, it aims to achieve integrated development in specific communities. In addition to supporting infrastructure, the programme places a strong emphasis on community involvement, women's equality, cleanliness, equity in society, and rural education facilities (Deore et al., 2022). The National Rural Health Mission, a plan to improve healthcare in rural areas, and the Provision of Urban Amenities in Rural Areas Program, which aims to offer urban infrastructure and services in countryside areas, creating possibilities and decreasing the movement of young people to urban areas, are two more significant programmes (Simbasiva et al., 2023).

The German Sustainable Development Strategy serves as a guiding tool in the policymaking of the German Government. This encompasses numerous lines of action also for promoting rural growth and attaining favourable outcomes in various domains,

including: eco-friendly farming and nourishment systems, eco-conscious construction and transportation reforms, recycling-based economy, shift towards renewable energy and climate initiatives, enhancing human welfare and capabilities, ensuring fairness in society, and fostering an unpolluted environment (German Federal Government Report, 2021).

The National Framework for Rural Development outlines the approach to rural development in France. Three major objectives are defined: i) develop new production methods that improve the competitiveness of farms by reducing the cost of production factors while preserving the natural resources from which farms derive their production; ii) promote the generational renewal of farms by promoting the creation, transfer and adaptation of farms and iii) protect the natural environment by implementing measures intended to preserve, restore and manage natural resources. EU funding under the EAFRD will be carried out with a total allocation of €16.7 billion for France for the period 2014-2022 (French Government, 2024).

The government has the powerful tools to scientifically research the rural social environment for a better understanding village-town relations and the possibility of creating a robust rural consciousness (Torre et al., 2023). The public studies can encompass a wide range of subjects, such as managing and planning rural land, sustainably managing water resources and wastewater in rural areas, using simulation and optimisation techniques, assessing risks to the rural environment, analysing policies related to the rural environment, protecting rural ecosystems, promoting biodiversity recovery, and addressing emerging environmental issues in rural areas (PSDR, 2024). The conclusions will support future strategies for achieving rural development.

Each of the above elements is important individually, but we have to underline the importance of the interconnectedness of rural development factors because their combination brings positive outcomes for society, the environment, and the economy. It forms a complex network that links rural areas in terms of symbolism, socio-economic components, and overall well-being. The complexity of rural development highlights the significance of numerous interconnected factors that shape it. The economy, comprising agriculture, infrastructure, and non-farm activities, forms the backbone of rural communities, driving economic growth and providing livelihoods. Social and cultural relations play a pivotal role in fostering community cohesion, resilience, and a sense of identity. Education empowers individuals, enhances skills, and promotes innovation, essential for sustainable development. The environment, with its biodiversity and natural resources, must be preserved for the well-being of current and future generations. Additionally, stakeholders, including local entities and public institutions, must collaborate effectively to drive progress. Governmental actions are crucial in providing the necessary support, infrastructure, and policies to enable rural development initiatives to thrive. In synergy, these factors create a dynamic ecosystem that supports the growth, resilience, and sustainability of rural areas, ultimately improving the quality of life for rural inhabitants and preserving the unique charm of rural landscapes.

The results of our study align with and expand upon existing research in the field of rural development. For instance, Cook (2011), Francisco and Tanaka (2019), Gharehbaghi et.

al. (2020), Sun and Zhu (2022) identified the critical role of infrastructure in enhancing rural economies, a factor strongly supported by our findings. Similarly, Noll et al., (2023), Nowak and Myśliwska (2018), Shafiei and Khaksar (2020), Podgorskaya and Schitov (2021) emphasized community engagement as vital for sustainable development, which our results corroborate. The importance of educational initiatives highlighted by Schafft, (2016) and Hanipah et al. (2024) is also evident in our analysis. Furthermore, the research by Gorman et al. (2001) on the significance of environmental influences aligns closely with our conclusions regarding the importance of the natural resources for farmers and rural communities. Finally, our study concurs with the findings of Torre and Wallet (2020) and Gupta and Agrawal (2019) on the impact of governmental policies in promoting rural development. These comparative insights not only validate our results but also provide a broader understanding of the multifaceted approach required for effective rural development.

### **Conclusions**

The comprehensive progress of rural areas is achieved through the complex combination of economic, social, cultural, environmental, and governance-related elements that contribute to building up rural development. Developing an accurate understanding of rural development requires taking into account a variety of factors, including different aspects of progress.

The rural economic environment is a significant factor and is sustained by three important arms: the agriculture sector, the infrastructure, and non-farm activities. Actions related to each of those large categories could positively influence rural development. The cultivation of social relations in rural areas and the preservation of local culture are strong determinants of development and allow community integration in the new social and economic landscape without losing the benchmarks that allow residents to maintain their sense of worth and life quality. Rural residents' overall welfare is directly influenced by education, which plays a crucial role in transforming rural areas. Education is both a result of progress and a catalyst for economic advancement. A harmonious approach could find a middle ground between the need for food and services in the countryside and the importance of protecting the environment. It is a fact that adopting a mindset that values the ecological surroundings could bring benefits to rural communities and the overall health of the population. The implementation of supportive policies and continuous initiatives by governments can greatly aid in achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development. By bridging the gap between rural and urban areas, these actions will contribute to the overall progress of the nation. It is essential for the government to consistently promote a lifestyle that aligns with nature, encouraging its citizens to embrace this harmonious approach.

The conclusion of the present paper is that by recognising these factors, stakeholders and policymakers may create targeted and tailored plans and legal frameworks that support rural development, promote equitable development, enhance community capacities and resilience, and raise rural residents' standards of living.

In expanding our conclusions, this study highlights several key implications for policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers aiming to foster rural development. Effective

strategies must consider the identified factors such as infrastructure development, educational initiatives, community engagement, environment and state intervention to create sustainable growth. Based on our findings, we recommend the implementation of targeted policies that address these areas and suggest ongoing collaboration between government bodies, local communities, and private entities to ensure holistic development. Further, the study underscores the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation to adapt and refine strategies in response to changing conditions and emerging challenges.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our research. We believe that the relationship between the various factors that contribute to rural development is multifaceted, and our study just touches the surface.

The scope was confined to open-access papers, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, the reliance on data from the Scopus database may have introduced a publication bias, as not all relevant studies might be indexed there. Future research should aim to address these limitations by including more studies and integrating data from multiple databases. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of the identified factors on rural development.

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